

# Fame and

## *A Glance at Safety Shortcomings Through*

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Late-night talk-show host David Letterman used to have a “stupid pet tricks” segment on his show, which he has now discontinued. Sailors, though, continue to make mistakes and injure themselves through acts that defy common sense. Not only do they lose work time, but often their thoughtless mistakes result in serious, permanent injuries.

There is the case of the Sailor who received chemical burns while stripping a deck. He wanted to be comfortable so he took off his shoes and stripped the deck in his socks. The stripping compound the Navy uses is strong and should be respected as an industrial chemical. This Sailor treated it as a harmless cleaner. The stripper ate through his socks, and he had to go to sick bay for chemical burns to his right foot.

In a similar situation, another Sailor (at a different command) used dental gloves during a two-day, deck-stripping evolution. You guessed it: On the second day his hands began to burn and a corpsman diagnosed him as having chemical burns.

If you’re working with hazardous materials, wear proper protective gear. Read manufacturers’ labels and data, along with Navy instructions indicating what protective gear must be worn when working with

chemicals. Wearing dental gloves when handling industrial-strength solvents is inviting injury from chemical burns.

Meanwhile, another Sailor who knew nothing about electricity barely escaped serious shock when tampering with a ship-board ventilation system. Specifically, he wanted to cool his berthing compartment and was erroneously told a control box outside the compartment was the temperature control for his living space. Despite the importance the Navy places on electrical safety and all the attention it receives throughout the fleet, this Sailor decided to use a car key to adjust what he thought was the temperature-controlling screw inside the control box. While adjusting the screw with one key, another key on his key ring touched a circuit breaker, creating sparks and knocking the young man down with a 115-volt punch.

Many injuries take place when Sailors return from liberty after they drank alcohol. One need not be drunk to fall victim to an alcohol-related incident. Sometimes having had just a few beers or mixed drinks clouds one’s

# Pain

## Successes and Throughout the Fleet

judgement enough to result in injury. Case in point: One Sailor was returning from liberty in a European port and was on the pier where he would take a liberty launch back to his ship. When it was time to board, he decided to jump from the pier into the launch, rather than use the ladder. He might not have been drunk, but his judgement was definitely impaired, as he misjudged the distance (eight feet) down to the launch, and he landed awkwardly. Both ankles buckled beneath him when he hit the deck of the launch. Only sore ankles? Hardly—the Sailor was immediately taken to a hospital where X-rays showed he broke both ankles. He required surgery, had each ankle in a cast for longer than six weeks, and was a loss to the ship.

Reading about such mishaps makes one pause and wonder, “What could these otherwise intelligent individuals have been thinking when they did what they did?” Sometimes, taking even the smallest situation for granted can have unpleasant—and painful—consequences.

☛ Fate sometimes places us in the wrong place at the wrong time. One petty officer was minding his own business on his back porch while his next-door neighbor was mowing the lawn with a riding mower. The mower hit an object and propelled it from the next-door yard, through the air, and into the face of our relaxing shipmate. He required stitches to his upper and lower lips, lost two upper teeth, and suffered damage to five lower teeth. Injury to the lower teeth resulted in three root canals, and he had to have the five teeth temporarily wired with a splint.

☛ Then there’s the story of the defiant Sailor who ignored his ship’s IMC announcements about staying clear of all weather decks because of heavy seas. Despite the repeated rough-weather warnings,

he had made up his mind to take in some fresh salt air and went out to a catwalk. He not only felt the sea breeze in his face, but also took on a lot of saltwater because a wave washed onto the weather deck where he stood, causing him to lose his balance. He fell and hit his head on the catwalk. The man was found minutes later with bleeding head trauma. What is puzzling is this was no inexperienced seaman who had just reported aboard: He was a petty officer 1st class, and the IMC announcements about the heavy seas were being made every 15 minutes.

☛ Sometimes Sailors perform foolish acts from which they might not directly suffer, but from which one of their shipmates will. Take the Sailor who climbed an access ladder and reached into a bucket to grab what he thought was a tool. The bucket didn’t have tools in it, but rather, paint thinner. The Sailor tipped the bucket when reaching for his imaginary tool, and when the bucket tipped, the man got a face and eyeful of paint thinner. He was able to go to a nearby eyewash station and flush his eyes. A sick bay examination determined he incurred no permanent injuries. Lucky for him, eh?

It all boils down to taking the extra couple of seconds to think about the consequences of what action we are about to take, whether it’s donning PPE for hazardous work, or using common sense while on liberty.

Taking shortcuts to shave minutes from a task more often than not results in hours or days of lost work time. Instead of being on the job or on liberty, you’re on your back, recovering from injuries sustained because you didn’t think before acting.

And remember that you have to live with the consequences of your actions, or lack of them. ☹